DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 381 CS 508 684

AUTHOR Siegel, Paul
TITLE The 1992 PBS Funding Debate: How Much Diversity Is America Willing To Pay for?
PUB DATE Feb 93
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western States Communication Association (Albuquerque, NM, February 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Cable Television; *Cultural Differences; Discourse Analysis; Educational Television; Financial Support; Information Sources; *Mass Media Role; Moral Issues; *Political Issues; *Programming (Broadcast); *Public Television
IDENTIFIERS Controversial Materials; Media Coverage; *Public Broadcasting Service; *Senate; Socioeconomic Diversity

ABSTRACT

The meaning of "diversity" was at the core of the U.S. Senate debate of 1991-92 concerning continued Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) funding, a debate that was both reported on and fueled by a parallel discourse on the topic in the popular press. Ideas about the diversity of programming fell into three sub-dimensions: (1) political diversity, along traditional liberal/conservative lines; (2) cultural diversity, in terms of speaker attributes and depictions of minorities; and (3) media outlet diversity, chiefly involving a comparison between programming and cable/commercial programs. Charges of media bias were leveled by both right and left. Some felt that the audience for educational programs (such as those about history, nature, or science) is duplicated on cable stations like A&E. To counter, others pointed out the popularity of PBS children's programs like "Sesame Street"--watched in most Hispanic and African-American households with children, as well as in schools and daycare centers. A parallel debate questioned whether the "elitists" were those who support or oppose government subsidies for public broadcasting. Advocates asked how much diversity can be afforded in a time of economic decline. Evidence suggests that the financial dimension of the argument was an ersatz one, a cover for the more explicitly content-specific complaints about PBS programming. The value of PBS is found in its fusion of its somewhat contradictory roles as a source of both diversity and national unity, in its niche as the "people's" network. (Contains 54 notes.) (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 373 381

The 1992 PBS funding debate: How much diversity is America willing to pay for?

Paul Siegel
Department of Communication Arts
Gallaudet University
Washington, DC 20002

A paper presented at the annual convention of the
Western States Communication Association
Albuquerque, NM: February, 1993

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
P. Siegel
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS508684

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

On Wednesday, August 26th, 1992, President Bush signed into law the Public Telecommunications Act of 1991, authorizing a total of approximately $1.1 billion in funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in years 1994, 1995, and 1996.[1] Thus ended a year's worth of delay[2] and legislative maneuvering, and some of the most acrimonious debate concerning the value of public broadcasting since its origin a quarter of a century ago.

The concept of diversity, certainly a hallmark of the 90s, was at the core of the Senate debate concerning continued PBS funding, a debate that was both reported on and fueled by a parallel discourse on the same topic in the popular press.[3]

The purpose of this essay is to review the differing perspectives on diversity that emerged in the Congressional debate of 1991-1992. Several related themes will be examined. The first of these is diversity of programming, a category that itself fell into three sometimes overlapping sub-dimensions: (a)political diversity, along a traditional liberal/conservative dimension (b)cultural diversity, in terms of speaker attributes and depictions of minorities; and (c) media outlet diversity, a dimension that chiefly involved a comparison between PBS programming and cable/commercial programming.

If diversity is a valued quality in the 90s, elitism is surely devalued. Thus it is no

---

[1]Congress is called upon to review funding for the CPB only once every 3 years. This procedure was designed to at least partially insulate public broadcasting from the politics of the moment.

[2]The Act began as Senate Bill 1504, introduced on July 19, 1991 by Senator Daniel Inouye [D-HI]. It was reported favorably out of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications on October 3, 1991. Several amendments were attached to the bill between March and June of 1992, which resulted in a bill identical to the House's version [H.R. 2977]. S. 1504 passed by a vote of 84-11 on June 3, 1992. 138 Cong. Rec S 7399.

[3]Most of the arguments for and against increased funding for PBS, which took up hundreds of pages in the Congressional Record, were touched upon in a debate that consisted of two op-ed pieces each by columnist George Will and Sharon Percy Rockefeller, President of WETA, Washington, DC's PBS station. See Will, Who would kill Big Bird? Washington Post, 4/19/92; Rockefeller, Big Bird: Someone didn't do his homework. Washington Post, 4/28/92; Will, $1.1 billion for Public TV? Washington Post, 5/12/92; Rockefeller, An answer to George Will's answer, Washington Post, 5/15/92.

surprise that a parallel debate, both on the Senate floor and in the popular media, asked whether the elitists were those who support or oppose government subsidies for public broadcasting.

Finally, advocates asked, as this essay's title suggests, how much diversity we can afford in a time of economic decline. As we shall see, there is much evidence to suggest that the financial dimension of the argument was an ersatz one, simply a cover for the more explicitly content-specific complaints about PBS programming.

A brief concluding section will argue that the value of PBS is found in its fusion of the somewhat contradictory roles as source of both diversity and national unity.

I. HOW DIVERSE ARE PBS' OFFERINGS?

A. Political Diversity

During the Congressional debates, Senator McCain reminded his colleagues that the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 already required the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to maintain "strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature."[4] He went on to accuse CPB of failing to meet that mandate. "All it takes is 1 week of watching the programs on the Public Broadcasting System," he asserted, "to see that there is no adherence whatsoever to the statutory mandate to provide objectivity and balance in controversial programming."[5] He reserved special condemnation for a PBS

---

[4]138 Cong. Rec. S. 2650. Senator McCain offered an amendment to the bill, which requires that CPB establish clear procedures for ensuring that the system does foster political balance, to seek out and respond to public criticism, and to make an annual report to the President concerning its progress. The amendment passed and became part of the Act.

[5]138 Cong Rec S 2650

documentary entitled "Maria's Story," which "did not even attempt to obscure its blatant bias"[6] in its heroic depictions of the Communist guerrillas in El Salvador. When asked about the perceived imbalance of her message, the film's co-director is said to have replied by drawing a comparison to Anne Frank's diary: "Nobody asked, 'why isn't Hitler's point of view told.'"[7]

In a similar vein, Senator Smith of New Hampshire criticized such programs as "Election Held Hostage" [which claimed that the Reagan Administration did indeed negotiate an "October surprise" with the Iranian hostage takers that would tip the election in their favor], "Cuba: In the shadow of doubt" [which the New York Times described as at best a "romantic infatuation with Cuba" and at worst "calculated propaganda"], "Days of Rage" [which Smith felt "extols the virtues of the Palestinian Intifada"], "Nicaragua: Report from the Front" [whose theme was summarized by a New York Times reporter as "Sandinistas are good; their opponents are bad; there is no middle ground"], and "After the Warming," which although "presented as a scientific program about the greenhouse effect," should more accurately have been labeled "science fiction." Concerning this last program, Smith was especially perturbed that PBS refused to air an alternative viewpoint, as could have been provided in a documentary entitled "The Greenhouse Conspiracy."[8]

---

[6] Id.

[7] Id.

[8] 138 Cong Rec S 2661. See also Congressman Ritter's comments:
"The Greenhouse Conspiracy," which was a critically acclaimed documentary that uses science to virtually take apart a good deal of this alarmist global warming theory, and theories that were the basis for a lot of the PBS programs, was not shown. The reason given was a lack of production values. Individual stations were forced to procure this program and the balance it represented, if they could, if they could afford it, by themselves.
138 Cong Rec H 7267.

The timing of the Senate debate was such that participants had at their disposal a recent press release from the ITVS, the Independent Television and Video Service. ITVS had been created by statute in 1988 and was granted $24 million to offer seed money to independent film makers.[9] In it, the ITVS Board revealed its first list of grant recipients. The array of titles of yet unseen, generally not yet completed new films provided ample fodder to those who opposed PBS funding on the basis of a perceived left-wing bias. Senator Dole simply made brief allusion to the list, and placed it in the Record, as if to suggest that any intelligent reader would agree with his assessment that the pattern of grants constituted further evidence of a lack of program balance: The list, he added, "suggests that we might have been better off when the ITVS was doing nothing more than just paying itself."[10]

Senator Gore, well known for his embracing of the environmental issue, offered a very different assessment of this particular documentary program:

> Some on the other side of the aisle are specifically concerned that the public broadcasting system does not say that the Earth's environmental crisis is a hoax.
>
> We have had explicit concerns raised about the fact that some public stations chose on their own initiative not to air some ridiculous program from another country that claimed the whole environmental crisis is a hoax. When we had documentaries on the Moon landing, should we have insisted that public broadcasting stations give equal time to some nut group that claims the Moon landing was staged on a movie lot in Hollywood?
>
> 138 Cong Rec S 2649

[9]Senator Dole derided the whole concept of the ITVS as an unneeded "alternative to an alternative." 138 Cong. Rec. S 7460.

[10]138 Cong Rec S 7461. Included within the list of ITVS grantees were the following:

Kathe Sandler's "A Question of Color" [which looks at "color consciousness" among African Americans and a value system based on physical features];

Victor Masayesva Jr.'s "Imagining Indians" [which will look at how Native Americans have been depicted in popular American media];

Barbara Abrash and Esther Katz's "A Public Nuisance" [documenting early public debates over birth control in the 1920s, and the power of media to shape those views];

Ellen Spiro's "Out Here" [examining southern gay and lesbian culture through eccentric and traditional personalities, from Tennessee Williams and Bessie Smith to contemporary southerners];

Sam Pollard, Peter Miller and John Valadez's "Citizen Dhoruba" [the story of a former Black Panther who was falsely accused of a crime and served 19 years until new evidence secured his recent release]; and

Puhipau and Joan Lander's "An Act of War" [portraying the 1893 American overthrow of Hawaii from a Native Hawaiian perspective.]

Senator McCain offered into the Record the text of a Wall Street Journal editorial, which criticized specific titles.

Criticism of PBS content on the basis of its perceived ideological imbalance is of course not the exclusive province of the Right. Critics on the Left will point to "Firing Line," or to the ubiquitous John McLaughlin, or to studies demonstrating that MacNeil/Lehrer's guest roster tends to be as top-heavy with Administration representatives [compared to Administration critics] as any commercial network news program.[11] Journalists, whether working for commercial networks or for PBS, are alleged to have an unhealthy interdependence upon their governmental sources, thus resulting in press scrutiny that may criticize specific misconduct of individual agents, but will rarely question fundamental assumptions.[12] Then too, PBS will sometimes be singled out for its insistence on being valued for its fierce editorial independence, while refusing to schedule programming that may offend its corporate underwriters.[13]

Senator Inouye did not directly refute Republican charges of PBS' left wing biases. Instead, he reminded his colleagues that it had been a Democratic Congress which had tried twice in recent years to require a balance of ideological broadcasts by all electronic media, commercial and noncommercial. He was referring to Congressional attempts to codify the Fairness Doctrine, an FCC requirement that the Commission rescinded in the late 1980s.

---

[11]See, for example, Aufderheide, A funny thing is happening to TV's public forum, Columbia Journalism Review, Nov. 1991, entered into the Record by Senator Simon, at 138 Cong Rec S 76.

[12]Bennett, News: the politics of illusion (1988); Parenti, Inventing reality: the politics of the news (1986).

[13]Cerone, Group protest PBS Self-Censorship, Los Angeles Times, 1/7/93; Shales, PBS censors' "prime" cuts: pure baloney. Washington Post, 2/9/93, p. B1.

President Reagan vetoed the bill, and President Bush made clear that he would veto it.

B. Cultural Diversity

Much of the Senate's criticism of PBS suggested not so much the dearth of conservative voices as the too frequent scheduling of programs that are plainly beyond the pale. Thus, Senator Byrd offered an amendment [which passed] that prohibits "indecent" programming either between 6 AM and 10 PM [by PBS or NPR stations that sign off the air at midnight or before] or between 6 AM and midnight [for any radio or TV station that goes off air after midnight].[14]

A fair amount of the broadcast indecency debate concerned PBS programming on the subject of homosexuality. By far the largest target for criticism was Marlon Riggs' Tongues Untied, which explores the complications and role conflicts of being Black, male, and gay in America.[15] Senator Helms' assessment of the program:

---

[14]The constitutionality of this portion of the new law will surely be challenged, and its fate is uncertain. Previously Congress had passed legislation directing the FCC to prohibit indecent broadcasts 24 hours a day. But that strategy was deemed unconstitutionally violative of the First Amendment by the Circuit Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia. 138 Cong Rec S 7307

[15]Other gay programming that received much criticism in the Congressional Record was The Lost Language of Cranes [based upon David Leavitt's novel about a father and son who both come to terms with their homosexuality], and Stop the Church [a documentary about gay activists' protests against the Catholic Church, and especially against New York's Cardinal O'Connor]. Senator Helms used a portion of his time to condemn what he sees as the "conversion" of prime time into "sleaze time,;" he cited the off-Broadway play, The Jerker, as an example of such sleaze. When the FCC began to cite radio stations for indecent broadcasting after a long period of restraint from such action, one of its targets was a radio station that had broadcast excerpts from the play, which Helms describes as "a sick discussion between two homosexuals describing how they perform their perverted acts." 138 Cong Rec S 7307.

A few weeks after the Senate passed the Public Telecommunications Act, Senator Dole took to the floor to denounce In The Life, a more recent PBS offering described by one critic as a variety show format that resembles a gay Ed Sullivan show. 138 Cong Rec S 8140. Shortly thereafter, Congressman Ted Weiss entered a lengthy condemnation of Dole into the Record:

> Mr. Speaker, nearly 45 years ago the House Committee on Un-American Activities voted to cite 10 distinguished writers and directors, collectively known as the Hollywood 10, for contempt of Congress. . . I thought we had learned a lesson from that experience. I never thought that gratuitous accusations of un-American activity would again come into vogue in this hallowed building. But I was wrong. . . . And from the sound of what I am hearing, gay men and lesbians have become America's new Communists.
>
> In his denunciation of "In The Life" last week, Senator Dole asks rhetorically, "Is this the kind of

> [It] blatantly promoted homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. It showed, what should I call it? I will be kind. It shows homosexual men dancing around naked. And they put that out on public television.[16]

Even supporters of the Public Telecommunications Act felt the need to single out the Riggs film as an example of excess. Senator DeConcini allowed that he "probably would have been shocked" had he stumbled across the program.[17] Senator Chafee told his colleagues that he "[does] not seek out programming that depicts half-nude bodies dancing on my television screen."[18]

Some of the debate on broadcast indecency was offered in the same posture as the "lack of balance" charge discussed above. Thus, Senator Helms cited a study on sexual allusions on network television entertainment programs. "It is significant," he said, "that most references to intercourse on television occurred between unmarried partners; this occurred five times as often as references to sexual activity between married couples."[19] Helms also entered into the Record a letter to him from Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council, which singles out a PBS/Children's Television Workshop program entitled "What Kids Want

---

programming taxpayers and public TV contributors have in mind? I do not think so."

The message. . . is very clear: gay men and lesbians are not Americans. That makes me sad. That makes me angry. Must I now fear that the time is not far off when the Congress convenes a new Committee on Un-American Proclivities, who will call Americans forward to answer for their sexual orientation.

Mr. Speaker, the only thing un-American going on here is the small-minded thinking of this program's attackers. That is not the American way. Public television was created to address the lives of all Americans. 138 Cong. Rec E 1869

[16]138 Cong Rec S 2655.

[17]138 Cong Rec S 7463

[18]138 Cong Rec S 7449

[19]138 Cong Rec S 7307

to Know about Sex." Bauer expressed displeasure with the programming choice not so much on the grounds that any of the subject matters addressed are themselves indecent or unsuitable for children, but rather that viewers were given a one-sided, anti-family perspective:

> The show is an attack on traditional family values in the guise of a pseudo-scientific presentation. . . . None of the instructors use the word "marriage" in any context. Sex is portrayed strictly as a physical act, without the larger moral and social contexts that constitute the real "facts of life." "Husbands" and "wives" are not mentioned, just "partners."
>
> Children are told that masturbation is completely harmless, which would be news to millions of kids whose parents and churches beg to differ.
>
> Homosexuality is misrepresented as essentially the same experience as heterosexuality. Children are told that homosexuals typically make love "when they care about each other." While this may be true in some cases, it is not the norm.
>
> Having a baby is illustrated through an exercise in which teens carry around a bag of flour--yes, a bag of flour--for a week and then talk about how it cramps their style. While it might be useful to tell teens about the very real burdens of parenthood, the segment functions as a commercial for abortion, since the bag of flour offers no feedback or rewards whatever. Parenthood, it seems, it all "hassle." Just as the show dehumanizes sexuality, it dehumanizes babies, subordinating life itself to the cold sexual imperative.[20]

Two additional, complementary themes related to cultural diversity emerged in the Senate debate. In one, we are told that program diversity is a valuable goal because it will enable otherwise parochial viewers to be exposed to other cultures, to people not like themselves. Probably the most eloquent statement of this theme appeared in an article [cited by Senator Tim Wirth] from the March 2, 1992 issue of Currents magazine, written by a former CPB President:

> So what makes public broadcasting "public"? . . . I think the answer to this question, and the key to the purpose of public broadcasting, relates to

---

[20]138 Cong Rec S 7422-7423

> the difference between a country and a market. The geographic United States and its population are a market. So is every other place and people. But we are also--very importantly for those of us who live here--a country. I think we all understand the difference.
>
> A country is a body politic and a culture that, if successful, enables a people to make good collective decisions, express their purposes, share some common values, protect themselves, develop to their full potential, and enhance their lives. "Markets" are vigorous, challenging, flexible and ultimately truthful. Their ability to learn, react and satisfy inspires admiration. But markets have no thoughts, values or higher purposes beyond their reflexive response to needs. Few people have knowingly fought or died for a market. . . .
>
> For good or ill, **most Americans today rely on television as their principal source of information about their country, other Americans and subcultures with which they have little contact**. They also rely on television for knowledge of their leaders and potential leaders, for most of the theater and opera they will see, for too much of the American history and literature they will learn and for much of the information, education and individual expectations that help us work as a country.[21]

The body politic as a whole relies upon public television to expose us to others, especially the members of subcultures with whom we would otherwise have little or no contact. But public television can also nurture the members of those subcultures themselves by showing their stories. As Senator Kerrey put it, the purpose of alternative programming is to serve audiences who "don't often see programs which reflect their lives with authenticity or depict life from their own point of view."[22] One specific audience that rarely sees their stories on TV, according to Washington Post TV critic Tom Shales, is the elderly. "Commercial TV doesn't care about them, because most advertisers write them off," Shales laments, "but they do represent a loyal component of the public TV

---

[21]138 Cong Rec S 6035

[22]138 Cong Rec S 7469

constituency."[23]

Generally, to argue for cultural diversity would seem to be to argue for more programming, not less. But there was at least one component of the Senate debate in which this was not so.[24] Often, our sense of cultural identity is as much a function of our hometown as it is of our ethnic or racial origins. Several Senators used their floor time to applaud the control exercised by each local PBS station's general manager in determining which programs available through the CPB would be appropriate for that specific market. From this perspective, those station managers who refused to air such programs as Tongues Untied or Stop the Church would be seen as fostering, rather than inhibiting, cultural "diversity." When Senator Dodd reminded us that "local stations are accountable to their audiences in a very important way" [depending upon them for donations], and cautioned his colleagues not to permit "Washington" to dictate what will be seen on each and every PBS station nationwide, the context of the debate suggested that by "Washington" he meant not only lawmakers, but also the CPB's too-centralized structure.[25]

C. Media Outlet Diversity

> Sometimes it's hard to tell public television from other channels on the cable lineup. The Discovery Channel now delivers public television's longtime staple -- animal shows. Arts & Entertainment seems to be [covering] the market in BBC programs, which used to go to public TV. Recently, WGBH

---

[23]Shales, Public TV's myopic critics. Washington Post, 5/21/92, D1

[24]A letter to the editor of the Washington Post makes the point that we could have more "diversity" in PBS programming if there were not so much duplication of service in those many areas of the country where viewers have access to 2 or more competing local PBS stations. Getting beyond rhetoric in the Public TV debate, Washington Post, 5/26/92, p. A 16.

[25]138 Cong Rec S 7336

> and ABC jointly produced an AIDS special for teenagers, which will air on ABC stations the day after it airs on public television.[26]

To this list, offered by Senator Simon of Illinois, could be added the joint coverage of the Republican and Democratic national conventions in a joint operating venture by NBC and PBS. Is PBS programming sufficiently different from other media options so as to merit public subsidy? This question was a major theme of the Senate debate.

Senator Inouye attempted to pre-empt anti-PBS arguments on this score by entering into the Record the text of a letter from Daniel Burke, President of Capital Cities/ABC:

> We strive to provide the highest quality news, entertainment, and sports programming on all of our commercial outlets. But we are limited by our need to reach audiences large enough to attract advertisers who will support the cost of our programming. There are many fine programs that for economic reasons, we must forego.[27]

Senator Sanford of North Carolina argued with more force than the facts would seem to justify that "public broadcasting is the one place where program funding decisions are made without regard to marketplace pressures."[28] In less sweeping language, Senator Wirth suggests that the "mission of bringing an audience and [an advertiser] together" at least do not "dominate" public broadcasting the way it does commercial television.[29]

---

[26]138 Cong Rec S 76. Also see Terguson, Not with my money, Washingtonian, July 1990: "With the demand for arts, science, and public affairs met by such enterprises as Arts & Entertainment, the Discovery Channel, Cable News Network, C-SPAN, and the Learning Channel, isn't the $170 million that Congress routinely dishes out for public television rather, well, redundant?"

[27]138 Cong Rec S 7306

[28]138 Cong Rec S 2646

[29]138 Cong Rec S 7324. Pat Aufderheide offered a contrary view:

> Even if public television isn't beholden to advertisers, it's still true that all money comes with strings. . . . Corporate dollars are usually tied directly to the production and promotion of particular programs (many taxpayer dollars pay for basic operations, and viewer dollars are used at the station's discretion). That makes big business the most influential agenda-setter in public television programming. "A funny thing happened is happening to

With respect to the perceived redundancy between cable and PBS offerings, several advocates reminded us that while cable penetration figures have risen dramatically in the last decade, and continue to rise, a full 40% of American households do not subscribe to cable services.[30] Senator Graham of Florida asks us to consider that PBS is deserving of support in part because of its relationship to the cable industry:

> It is exactly because public television demonstrated that there was an audience for programs of nature, programs of education, science, that then made it possible for there to be the commercialization of those through networks such as A&E.
>
> I submit that the emergence of such excellent networks as Arts & Entertainment, Bravo, and Discovery came about precisely because of public broadcasting. Public broadcasting has served as the laboratory from which much that cable offers has developed. The success of PBS programs such as "National Geographic," "Nova," and "Cosmos" paved the way for the development of commercial programming like that found on the Discovery Channel. With similar programming and viewers, public television helped to demonstrate the clear demand for television shows about science and nature. Likewise, cultural programming on public broadcasting such as "Masterpiece Theatre," opera productions and the ballet led to cable stations like Arts & Entertainment and Bravo. . . .Who knows what the next generation of public-television-inspired cable productions will be?[31]

Also, the argument is made that PBS would do well not to try to emulate the cable offerings that its critics hold up as a reason for non-renewal of its funding. Tom Shales has this to say to those who point to the "explosion of cable channels" and the resultant "redundancy" of PBS:

> Cable's A&E Network, often cited as a potential public TV substitute, just announced its new fall lineup. Among the highlights: reruns of the old

---

TV's public forum," Columbia Journalism Review, Nov., 1991. Cited by Senator Paul Simon at 138 Cong Rec S 76

[30]Rockefeller, An Answer to George Will's Answer

[31]138 Cong Rec S 7416-7417

> NBC detective series "The Rockford Files"; a series called, and about, "Spies" through the ages; "American Justice," about famous crimes; and "Travel Quest," a travelogue featuring pasty-faced sitcom actor Alan Thicke.
>
> A&E describes Thicke's show thus: "Each week, host Alan Thicke takes viewers on a whirlwind adventure where the possibilities are endless, beginning with a weekend on the Big Island of Hawaii."
>
> What a renaissance![32]

II. IS BIG BIRD AN ELITIST?

Although the Public Telecommunications Act had been introduced several months before, the public's involvement in the PBS debate began in earnest with the publication of George Will's column, "Who would kill big bird?" in the April 23, 1992 Washington Post. [The column appeared in several other papers nationwide on that date or a few days thereafter.] The theme of Will's initial foray into the issue is that public broadcasting is an "upper middle class entitlement program."[33]

> The public television lobby consists disproportionately of people with the means to provide their own entertainment, but who have the political competence to bend public power to their private advantage. . . . Public television audiences are, like the members of the American Medical Association, the National Association of Manufacturers and many other muscular lobbies, largely affluent, educated and articulate.[34]

The $1.1 billion of funding PBS was seeking over the 1994-1996 time period could be raised from the system's existent donor base of viewers, Will asserts. Nationwide, PBS has 5.2 million voluntary donors amongst its viewers. If each of these would donate an

---

[32]Shales, Public TV's Myopic Critics

[33]Senator Lott, in introducing an amendment that would freeze CPB funding for 3 years [the amendment failed] used the precise same language to refer to the PBS subsidy. 138 Cong Rec S 7401

[34]Will, Who would kill Big Bird

additional $70 annually, the taxpayers could be spared.

In Will's home base, WETA is the local PBS outlet. That station's documents boasts to potential corporate underwriters that its own contributors have an average household income of $94,583. "They would have $94,513" left, Will chides them, were they to provide the additional contribution.

Senator Dole carries Will's ball a bit further, pointing out that

> According to WETA, its contributors have an average household net worth of $627,000. . . And an average investment portfolio of $249,000. One out of eight contributors is a millionaire; 1 out of 7 has a wine cellar in his or her house; and 1 out of 3 spent time in Europe in the past 3 years. This is the target audience for PBS' prime-time programs.[35]

Dole then looks beyond Washington to Boston for further evidence of the elite nature of PBS' target audience. When WGBH decided to open up a store to sell PBS-licensed merchandise [books, videotapes, toys, etc.]

> Guess where [it] has decided to set up its first store? I bet you are going to say in the inner city? You have to be kidding. In downtown Boston itself? In some noncable area? No. It's opening up in what the New York Times calls "the affluent Chestnut Hill Mall in Newton, MA." The Times also tells us that the Newton store "has been so successful that another store will open in Harvard Square. . . Harvard Square and the affluent Chestnut Hill Mall? It is pretty obvious these public TV stores have been carefully targeted to go where its audience is -- upscale, suburban America. . . . PBS defenders never fail to lecture us that many Americans cannot afford cable, another reason to keep public TV on the public welfare rolls. So far, not one has said anything about those Americans who cannot afford PBS video cassettes, who cannot afford to shop in the Chestnut Hill Mall, and cannot afford to buy Bill Moyers' latest book.[36]

Writing in the Washingtonian magazine, Andrew Terguson echoes Will's sentiments

---

[35] 138 Cong Rec S 7426

[36] 138 Cong Rec S 7429

as he tries to place PBS' funding request into historical context:

> Most [Great Society] programs were organized according to Voltaire's dictum that "the art of government consists in taking as much money as possible from one class of citizens to give to another." The class that was supposed to be bled was the rich, and the beneficiaries were to be the poor. Public television reverses this. . . .[37]

Sharon Percy Rockefeller, president of WETA in Washington, DC, first replied to Will in the Washington Post's April 28, 1992 issue. "While it is refreshing to see Mr. Will in his guise of a populist," she begins, "his statements about public television are often distorted, often just plain wrong." Concerning Will's charge of elitism against PBS's target audience, Rockefeller chides Will for confusing donors with viewers. Will's error is "disingenuous," she claims. "It stands to reason that members are most likely to be drawn from the more affluent viewers. Like all other institutions that rely on contributions, public television has a membership that is more skewed to the higher income groups than its viewership." She goes on:

> A third of public television households have annual incomes of less than $20,000, and 60 percent earn less than $40,000. Recent surveys of the "Sesame Street" audience show that the program reaches nearly a quarter of all U.S. households with incomes under $10,000, over half of the Hispanic households that have children, and over 40 percent of African-American households with children. "Sesame Street" is also shown in thousands of day care centers. This is elitist?[38]

Others assert that it is Will and his supporters who are guilty of elitism. An editorial in the St. Petersburg Times charges: "It appears he believes that people who are interested in in-depth news analysis (MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour), provocative documentaries

---

[37]**Terguson, Not with my money [cited by Senator Dole at 138 Cong Rec S 7435]**

[38]**Rockefeller, Big Bird: Someone didn't do his homework**

(Frontline), quality drama (Masterpiece Theater) and intelligent children's programming (Sesame Street) can be only those as schooled as he and from a similarly affluent income range.[39]

Apart from questions about the complexion of PBS' typical viewer, advocates on both sides of the funding issue had to address whether PBS' programming itself is "elitist." To be sure, the concept of audience is hard to separate from the programming targeted towards that audience. Former Mobil Oil PR whiz Herb Schmertz bragged on several occasions that although PBS' overall audience may very well resemble America, audiences for specific programs might be precisely the kinds of upscale folks advertisers crave. Masterpiece Theatre, which Schmertz himself designed and for which he selected the programs, helped transform Mobil into "the thinking man's gasoline."[40]

Or consider Ken Burns' The Civil War miniseries, which drew such widespread acclaim that PBS' detractors felt the need to predict that such a worthy project could surely have found corporate funding. Not so, said Rockefeller: "Where were all those potential investors when a young, unknown filmmaker came to public television and proposed 11 hours of photographs buttressed by music and voice? They were salivating over 'Roseanne.'"[41]

If some kinds of programming are more "elitist" than others, might the stigma be

---

[39]Heck, Public Television is for all, wealthy and poor. St. Petersburg Times, 6/9/92

[40]138 Cong. Rec S 76 [Senator Simon speaking]

[41]Rockefeller, "Big Bird: Someone didn't do his homework." A letter writer in the Washington Times takes Ms. Rockefeller to task for this crack: "WETA President Sharon Rockefeller knows what's good for the toiling masses. And what's good for them is to help pay her salary while she mocks their taste in television. The nerve of those little people, salivating over something like Roseanne." Miffed over public television, Washington Times, 5/1/92

undone by making that which traditionally had been available only to the discerning few open to the masses? Rockefeller reasons thus as she reminds us that when PBS broadcast Wagner's "Ring Cycle" in 1990, it was seen by more people in one week on PBS than the total cumulative audience for the work performed live since 1876.[42]

Perhaps the truth lies somewhere between the two sides' hurling the "elitist" epithet at each other. That same Washingtonian article cited by Senator Dole asks us to consider whether PBS viewers really are all that sophisticated:

> Public television is TV for people who pretend to hate TV. The middle-brow knows enough to think that "Who's the Boss" is stupid, and he knows that his interests should lie in art and learning; that uncomfortable inkling is the goad to his ambition. And yet, and yet--he can't quite bring himself to turn off the TV. He'd resent being called a couch potato -- worse, a pretentious couch potato. Let's bring him up a notch and call him *la pomme de terre a la couche.*
>
> What this *pomme de terre* wants can be found in books and museums and performances. But each of these requires some concentration and discipline. . . . Of course, if he wants to be entertained, he'd do better to watch Cheers. And if he really wanted to learn about the art of the western world, he could haunt the National Gallery. But his conscience won't permit the former, and his ambition isn't strong enough for the latter more than once or twice a year.
>
> So when the TV sizzles on, and the blue glow fills the room like stardust, the *pomme* gazes for an hour as a camera pans over great works of art and glides down gilded hallways and does cartwheels in great rotundas. Any extended contemplation is unlikely, owing to the thunderous music, the relentless movement of the camera, and the bland voice-over (though it's British and reassuring). The viewer's attention can wander from the TV to the office to the mortgage payment to the TV to the wine cellar. But when the hour ends *la pomme* is satisfied. He feels pretty good about himself. He reminds himself to write that check to WETA this year for sure.[43]

---

[42]Rockefeller, An answer to George Will's answer

[43]138 Cong Rec S 7435

III. HOW MUCH OF A GOOD [?] THING CAN WE AFFORD?

In George Will's second attack on PBS, he stipulates that it is a "net enhancement of American life." But can we afford it? Government resources are scarce, and can we really say that PBS's claims on those resources are "stronger than those of child immunization, the National Institutes of Health, and a thousand competing causes?"[44] The Post's own Richard Cohen replies that without more details, he cannot assess the standing of those "thousand competing claims." As for the NIH, and child immunization, of course their priority must be higher than that of PBS. "But then I would give the same answer for Yellowstone National Park or the space program."[45]

It is important to recall that the Senate debate was not presented as one about the overall wisdom of PBS subsidies. Although Representative Richard Armey of Texas did propose legislation that would cut off PBS funding altogether, the bill was never treated seriously, although Senator Lott's [unsuccessful] amendment to freeze PBS funding for 3 years garnered a fair amount of support.

But a closer examination of the actual debate belies the assertion that money is all that was at issue. Even Senator Lott, who claimed that his amendment demonstrated that his sole interest was in fiscal responsibility, nonetheless joined the attack on specific PBS programming, and praised the decision of his local PBS general manager for not running Tongues Untied in Mississippi.[46] Upon hearing about the then upcoming program, The

---

[44]Will, $1.1 billion for Public TV?

[45]Cohen, The Market and PBS. Washington Post, 5/29/92

[46]138 Cong Rec S 7399

Lost Language of Cranes, which also has a gay theme, he took to the floor, charging that "they have not learned their lesson over there."[47] In the course of the same speech, he made his intentions all the more clear:

> Again, my amendment is not directed at what they have been doing, in balance and fairness and the content of some of their programs. But one way to get the message through to them -- that you need to shape your act up, [that] times have changed and the programs you are running are highly questionable, in many instances -- is to at least freeze their funding.[48]

When PBS makes its triennial case for expanded federal funding, it is caught in an elegant rhetorical trap. To demonstrate that the service enjoys much public support [thus warranting increased funding], PBS's lobbyists present their pie charts, which show that federal tax dollars supply less then 17% of the total system budget, and in some locales as little as 6% of individual station budgets. Opponents are thus presented with the chance to reply, "if it's such a piddling amount," why not just do without it altogether?[49]

IV. CONCLUSION: HOW TO MAKE THE CASE FOR FUNDING?

In the 1991-1992 debate about PBS funding lay the skeleton of an argument for the unique place of public broadcasting in American life. It is surely true, to begin, that both sides of the "diversity" debate have some truth on their side. Many of the genres that comprise a large percent of PBS offerings--nature and science programs, "high brow" cultural performances, etc.--inarguably have their counterparts on cable. And although 40%

---

[47] 138 Cong Rec S 7414

[48] Id.

[49] Miffed over public television, Washington Times

of American homes do not receive cable, the more relevant statistic to be used in favor of funding PBS from the public treasury would be the percent of those homes that do not get cable because they cannot afford the monthly fees.

No doubt it is also true that, within each genre, PBS does provide a measure of uniqueness, and of higher quality. Its NOVA is plainly a better program, typically on more timely topics, than much of what the Discovery network offers. And while the Bravo network does offer much of the same kind of musical, theatrical and dance performances as we might find on PBS, there is nothing on that or any other cable or commercial network that attempts to accomplish what PBS has done in its controversial "Point of View" series.

The argument gains steam when we try to assess to what extent the driving force behind PBS programming offers a respite from the market-driven commercial [and to a lesser extent, cable] media outlets. To begin with, PBS is hardly immune from commercial pressures. Marc Weiss, the executive producer of the P.O.V. series, tells the story of chasing corporate donations for the concept:

> We knocked on a hundred corporate doors and they said, "We'll pass, thank you." Finally, Lands' End, the large mail-order firm, expressed interest. But then executives viewed one of the more controversial programs in the anthology series. Weiss recalls the one-sentence good-bye: "We don't think our customers would like this show."[50]

Along the same lines, producer Liz Schlick from the children's science series, "Newton's Apple," says of the behind-the-scenes influence enjoyed by Dupont, the program's sole corporate sponsor at the time: "Some things we would want to deal with--such as

---

[50] 138 Cong Rec S 76

chemical pollution--[the executive producer] wouldn't let us touch."[51] As Pat Aufderheide succinctly puts it in the Columbia Journalism Review article entered into the Congressional Record, PBS's offerings are indeed splendid, but they are "safely splendid."

Yet if we cut governmental funding on the grounds that PBS is not daring enough, we send the producers to those same corporate underwriters with an even larger cup in hand, and will thus wind up with even more timid programming.

The charges and countercharges of elitism by both sides of the PBS debate is best viewed as little more than distraction from the agents' more ideological agenda. In any event, as long as elitism is treated as a demonic term, the debate will never be a helpful one. Perhaps PBS' proponents need to embrace and thus defuse the word, to admit--even boast?--openly that their programming is "elitist," at least in some senses of the word. The programming will only justify government support if it is somehow better than programming not currently receiving such support. Rockefeller's plea to the effect that opera and classical music and dance are "meant" to be seen without commercial interruption is one that needs to be driven home with conviction. PBS' proponents will need to also grow more comfortable making explicit arguments regarding the manifest superiority of the system's public affairs programming. The argument needs to be made not only that MacNeil/Lehrer is different from the network news programs, or even from most CNN programming, but that it is in some ways demonstrably better than the competition.

None of these issues are new to the PBS debate. Congressman Dingell entered into the Record the text of an article from Broadcasting magazine from over 20 years ago:

---

[51] 138 Cong Rec S 77

> If public broadcasting draws large audiences, it is attacked for seeking the masses; if it programs for small select groups, it is damned as an insufferable snob. If it tackles tough issues, it is trendy, left-wing, unrepresentative and misusing the taxpayers' money; if it presents fine drama and stimulating discussion, it is aloof and uninvolved.[52]

Perhaps the best argument in favor of continued and augmented governmental support of public broadcasting is the special niche PBS has carved for itself, however unwittingly, in response to a changing media environment. During most prime time hours, PBS' audience is small enough to consider its mission one of narrowcasting rather than broadcasting. Yet the simple fact that it is a public network makes it a bit more. Just as PBS' financial support from viewers is used by its fundraising and lobbying staff as evidence of public enthusiasm for the service when trying to seek additional corporate [or governmental] dollars, so too does the fact of government support serve to reify the "public" in public broadcasting, to make it the people's network. Rockefeller put it well when she touted PBS as "one of the great unifying themes of our country."[53] Senator Wirth made the same point when he argued against those who claim that the proliferation of cable will provide for all of our highly individualized media choices. It is fitting to close with his words:

> We have to recognize that we are losing something in this process. Like it or not, television is our primary source of information about what is happening in our country. We don't communicate through other media or common gatherings as we did in the past. If we fragment the television audience into a collection of market niches, we will lose one of the remaining common cultural bonds that help unite us.[54]

---

[52] 138 Cong Rec E 1542

[53] Rockefeller, Big Bird: someone didn't do his homework

[54] 138 Cong Rec S 6035. He goes on to suggest that by having one network offering quality, commercial-free programming, we achieve another related advantage--the positive effects of "audience flow" from one program into the next: "Viewers who tune in for a historical documentary may be drawn to a cultural program that they would be unlikely to seek out on a separate channel." So programs such as Burns' The Civil War have more impact on PBS than they would have on a hypothetical "History" cable television network.